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Qualitative evaluation processes in arts educational projects

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Abstract

In this article we focus on evaluation processes through an arts education project evaluated using a pluralistic evaluation format. In the project artists worked in kindergartens and schools together with teachers. The essential concepts of pluralistic evaluation form the theoretical framework. The evaluation data included project documents, interviews and the final report of the whole project. The critical points of the project evaluation is building the criteria and making the values behind the evaluation visible and recognized. Good interaction, respect and mutual confidence between the actors make successful evaluation possible. The central questions were the relationship between practice and research and the significance of the value-bound nature of the evaluation processes.

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1. Introduction

Evaluations are indispensable parts of projects that are under great expectations concerning profitability and efficiency. In modern societies, practices are required to be evidence-based (Dahler-Larssen, 2000; Mark, Greene & Shaw, 2007; Slavin, 2002). The evaluation has different tasks in the world of projects. In almost every evaluation there is information collected; the character of the information is important: is it usable and is it essential? When the evaluation is completed, one must determine if the project failed or succeeded or did it reach the targets that were set. The third aim for the

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evaluation is development, and then the focus is on supporting the achievements. In such an evaluation, utility is especially underlined (Patton, 1997; Chelimsky, 2007).

Comparison is always connected to evaluation and in a typical evaluation the status at the end of the project is compared to the status at the beginning and the targets reached are compared to the aims that were set. Comparison is the factor that separates evaluation from follow-up studies (Vartiainen, 2000). Another innate quality of evaluations is their connection to values; they are value-bound. Evaluation includes value judgments that make evaluation research distinctive. Evaluation criteria include value loadings; in evaluation research, it is necessary to make these essential values visible (see, Lemaitre 2002; Vuori, 2004).

Evaluation research is practical exploration in which theory and convention are in dialogue with each other (Cuba & Lincoln, 1989; Patton, 1997). Project evaluation moves along the border between practical development and research. Evaluation research is built on practices and the logic of research and the quality of the research includes all the same factors as any other research. The technical quality of evaluation research mainly depends on how much money; work and time are expended (Patton, 2002.) For example, program- and project evaluations provided by the European Council focus on evaluation from the following points of view:

- 1) Evaluation must meet the needs;
- 2) Evaluation must be appropriate;
- 3) The evaluation process must be open;
- 4) The evaluation arrangement must be functional;
- 5) Evaluation must be reliable;
- 6) The analyses must be orthodox;
- 7) The results must be plausible;
- 8) The conclusions must be objective;
- 9) The reports must be explicit, and
- 10) The developmental recommendations must be advantageous.

These quality factors are generally also used in Finnish public administration evaluation criteria (Virtanen, 2007, 213–214). According to Patton (2002), the evaluator need not be a specialist of the achievement evaluated, but rather a leader of the dialogue and speculation together with different actors of the project. Therefore, the evaluation contains the points of view of different parties of actors and the best knowledge of the local activity environment.

The target of project evaluation is to produce systematic knowledge of the execution of projects together with the results of the projects. Often there are expectations that evaluation will contribute information about the effects of the project as well as their accomplishments. It is typical that the evaluation is designed especially for the individual project. For instance, the REA-tool (relational evaluation approach) developed by the Health and Welfare Institute, offers an evaluation parse for different social- and welfare projects. Because it is available on the Internet, it spreads information and good practices in the use of different projects and actors (<https://pilotointi.innokyla.fi/menetelma.php>).

Usually project evaluation begins with the project documents and the aims of the project. Often evaluation focuses on results and in combining them to previously-set aims. Evaluation may also concentrate on processes or it may measure the satisfaction of the different actors or customers involved in the project (Chelimsky, 2007; Vartiainen, 2000).

A versatile project evaluation includes at least the following elements. It must consider the motives of the project and evaluation: what are the aims of the project and on which values is it based? Perceiving the project's context aids in the analyses of the operational environment. It is also important to understand the entity and logic of the project. The information about resources, customers, project partners and organizational processes and methods helps in perceiving the entity of the project. A successful

evaluation declares concrete evaluation questions. The framework helps in comprehending the conceptual-theoretical aspects of the target or achievement (Vartiainen, 2004, 20-21).

2. Research problems, data, methods and study design

In this article, we explore starting points and opportunities for success in project evaluation, especially from the pluralistic evaluation point of view. In this exploration, we examine an arts education project in which pluralistic evaluation was used. We contemplate the questions and problems that unavoidably arise when the evaluation is targeted in multifaceted development projects.

The pluralistic evaluation model was used in an arts education project that includes a wide range of subprojects. The achievement was based on an arts and history education project that was conducted in schools and kindergartens by teachers and artists. The subprojects included circus, dance, architecture, the environment and visual arts as well as literary art and drama projects. The enterprise began in Helsinki in 2000 and the subprojects lasted intensively 1,5-3 years. The artists' visits to kindergartens and schools continue, but they are shorter and on a smaller scale. The aim of the evaluation was to explore the fulfilment of the objectives of the project and, on the other hand, to show the good practice models that could be used and adapted in other kindergartens and schools.

The objectives of the project were planned precisely in cooperation with different participant groups. Still, the evaluation revealed that the objectives that were set together were appreciated and emphasized differently by different actors in the project. For example, agreement on the starting points was not confirmed in the planning stages.

The key groups for the pluralistic evaluation were teachers, artists and administrators. The selection was made because these actor groups could offer much information and they were available for the interviews (compare Vartiainen, 2007). Other groups that could have been selected as members were the children, their parents and managers of the institutes involved. There was an attempt to conduct children's interviews, but the resources for the evaluation were insufficient to accommodate processing the data that would have been obtained from these extra groups. Teachers questioned the attitudes and enjoyment of the children and their parents.

The evaluation material included interviews that represent subjective material, and the final report of the project that forms the common view of the key groups about the project. The final report represented the inter-subjective data of the pluralistic evaluation. In addition, there was data from the follow-up material of the project and memorandums of the project coordinating team. Putting the evaluation research into the right context was easy because one of the researchers (Nevanen) was a representative of the administration of the kindergartens, which made the operational environment familiar. On the other hand, the fact that one of the researchers represented one of the key actor groups caused problems. Therefore, a neutral, objective outsider was chosen to conduct the interviews because critical notices about the project or its administration had to be made.

The evaluation proceeded as a dialogue between the data material and the theoretical framework. The analysis approach was practical. The analysis criteria and level of comparison took time to shape. Through trials an efficient and suitable method of managing this data was found. The evaluation began as a target-based evaluation. The key groups noted that the project reached and even exceeded its objectives (compare to the control assignment of the evaluation). During the project period, the target-based evaluation changed to a professional-based evaluation in which the criteria no longer consisted of the targets of the project, but the base of the comparison became the teachers' and artists' conceptions about the project work compared to other, similar achievements carried out with children of the same age.

The analysis of the data material was made using qualitative analysis methods. The written material was analysed using themes and types. Comparison was made between different actor groups, different

data and different subprojects. The most interesting and surprising points of view were found from the interviews that represented the subjective data material. It included the most profound information about the project. Subjective data also brought up the most critical assessments about the project, but also the most surprising results which were not planned and which were not visible in the target planning of the project.

From the point of view of development, three interesting themes were analyzed and explored more thoroughly. They were arts education carried out by teachers and artists as multi professional cooperation; the kindergarten and school were seen as arts education environments and arts education as a developer of general learning skills. Analyzing these themes also expanded the effects of the project.

3. Special elements of evaluation in arts education

Evaluation in arts education is challenging because the matters evaluated are subjectively significant to the individuals who experience them. The evaluation reaches to a holistic impression of the elements and completeness of the artistic achievements. The evaluation must consider how the artist, the work of art and the receiver, as well as the pedagogical context, interact and communicate with each other. Arts education evaluation should be based on experience and standards that are built on solid professional skill and observation of practices. The evaluator must be familiar with the quality elements of the arts education that are being promoted in the arts education project. The quality is confined to the context and the quality in different fields of art is based on different elements. When evaluating the quality of arts education the focus is on comprehensiveness and experimental aspects (Stake & Munson, 2008, 13–14; Sava, 1997, 261; Dewey, 2005).

Learning in arts and skills is the process of sharing experiences and it is based on the experiential model of learning. Significant elements in teaching arts and skills are sense- and emotional knowledge, skill- and operational knowledge, artistic-aesthetic conception- and imaginary knowledge as well as consciousness about an individual's own action processes. These special elements should also be taken into account in evaluation. Although arts education evaluation deals with very subjective experiences, it must go beyond a simple description of the phenomenon. The evaluation must combine the conclusions of the credits of the activity and show their foundation (Sava, 1997; Stake & Munson, 2008, 19).

External or internal evaluations produce different information. Internal evaluations or self-reflection can reach emotions and experiences that may be difficult to reach through an external evaluation. External evaluation aims to gather information that is objective and can be generalized. At its best, these evaluations can be connected to an interactive and dialogic evaluation that makes it possible to gain information and knowledge about how the learning process and its results show externally but also how they can be seen internally as personal individual experiences, interpretations or opinions.

We can also mention formal and informal evaluation, where there are connections between the everyday evaluation of tasks and changes of opinions about them and a formal evaluation, which acts with the logic of the research (Mark, Greene & Shaw, 2007; Stake & Munson, 2008; Sava, 1997). Today evaluation often has a pluralistic approach, a synthesis that connects the best parts of different evaluation models. The essential criteria for a successful evaluation are that they can answer the value questions.

4. Pluralistic evaluation

The essential starting points in the plural evaluation model developed by Pirkko Vartiainen are the different interest groups that are the producers of the evaluation information. The evaluation is a process of exploring the interaction between the evaluation target and the environment, understanding the nature of the information collected, forming the evaluation criteria, analysing the results and finally, developing

a system to provide feedback. Using this evaluation method, participatory and interactive approaches are utilized (Vartiainen, 2007; Ojala & Vartiainen, 2008).

Recognizing the key groups is a central factor in a successful evaluation. The key groups are usually formed by the actors, who can offer broad information about the evaluation's target. It is important to select the key groups so that not only those who have power and a central role in the organization will be selected, but those who have a different point of view will also be included to make them visible and in dialogue with the others. A definitive condition for pluralistic evaluation is that the results be interpreted in connection within the context. The context engagement can be divided into theoretic-conceptual and practical context analyses. The theoretical context works as a framework and the practical context analysis connects the achievement that is being evaluated as a part of surrounding society and reality.

The evaluation criteria are usually formed during the evaluation processes through the information produced by key groups and dialogue of theoretical information and knowledge. The criteria may also be defined by the key groups. The data may include both qualitative and quantitative materials. The pluralistic evaluation material can be classified as subjective and inter-subjective document data and objective facts. The subjective material consists of individuals' points of view, opinions and experiences. The information is varied and often contradictory. Inter-subjective material includes information on which the key groups have reached a consensus. In addition, the evaluation material includes such information as follow-up materials or statistics concerning the organization (Vartiainen, 2007, 152–168).

The data may be analysed using a theoretical or practical approach or by combining them. The theoretical analysis is suitable for conceptual and abstract materials. The practical approach is better when the evaluation aims to produce evidence about how the reformations and innovations work in practice. In analysis it is essential to place the evaluation process and data within a theoretical a framework that makes the comparison possible. There must be a solution found methodologically for the level of comparison; the concepts that are used as well as the analytical methods must be clarified and defined. In pluralistic evaluation, the results of the evaluation are compressed and concretized into evaluation clauses. These compressed expressions are meant to lift up the positive and negative elements that rise from the evaluation processes (Ojala & Vartiainen, 2008, Vartiainen, 2007).

5. Conclusions

The building of the whole picture of the project required comparison of different evaluation data and comparison of points of view of the actor groups and connecting them. None of the data collected could singly offer comprehensive information about the project. A pluralistic evaluation method is effective in structuring the qualitative analysis of a wide and varied development project. This evaluation method synthesizes the subjective and informal evaluation data with target-based and formal evaluation information.

In our example, the evaluation began from a target-based evaluation arranged by an administration group, but during the process, it widened and turned into a professional self-reflection by teachers and artists. The evaluation material shows clearly how the professional background and the value basis of the actors affected the targets of the evaluation and how the interpretation was made. For example, the artists saw it important to success in the entire artistic project: the process as well as the high-quality products, while the teachers focused on working processes and the instrumental value of the arts for the other subjects' learning. On the other hand, the administrators saw the support for social development and equality as important. All these different values lived side by side during the project and did not conflict. The different, surprising and unforeseen results that appeared in the subjective and informal data brought significant new information for the development of the achievements (compare, Mark, Greene & Shaw, 2007).

The critical point in project evaluation became finding well-working evaluation criteria when the targets of the project were inadequate for evaluation alone. It was challenging to find commonly declared criteria for evaluation material that were based on professional knowledge and skills. Still, this strengthened the transparency and reliability of the evaluation research. Finding the balance with the standards and professionalism and experiences was a significant challenge (compare, Stake & Munson, 2008).

Pluralistic evaluation also requires good interaction and cooperation between the actors to succeed. It is also a premise for developmental work and reliability of the evaluation. The advances of pluralistic evaluation are a practical approach and the compression of information in short evaluation statements that make the information usable. In this method of evaluation, it might become difficult to handle the data materials, which makes the analysis processes much more difficult and the whole research process becomes unmanageable. At its best, pluralistic evaluation helps to structure broad evaluation entities and the holistic approach, which takes special characteristics of the evaluated task into account and suits arts education project evaluation well.

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